



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

*A NEW NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION*<sup>1</sup>

GEORGE A. COE

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

That religion has a natural history, being included under the concepts that constitute the sciences of biology, psychology, and sociology, may by this time be assumed without argument. Details of the movement remain to be determined, but there is no longer any occasion to ask whether religion, or some form of it, is interpolated into the system of nature. But to adopt a principle is not the same as to apply it consistently. In spite of good intentions, remnants of the older view become incorporated into our would-be scientific structures. As instances, Professor King, in the book under review, specifies Max Müller's "perception of the infinite," Morris Jastrow's "religious instinct," Tiele's "innate sense of infinity," Brinton's postulate of "a religiosity of man as a part of his psychical being," and the theological notion of the gradual revelation of a specific and so-to-say pre-determined idea of God. In all these King sees only so many interpolations. They inject a formed religious consciousness into history, instead of explaining the genesis of the consciousness itself. The author therefore undertakes to show how religion first emerges out of a pre-religious type of life, and how ceremonial, the gods, and the development of high religions can all be fully accounted for by strictly natural conditions. Whether or not all his conclusions are convincing, he has produced a book that must be reckoned with. For not only does he attack a fundamental problem in a radical manner; not only has he collected a rich fund of anthropological material; he also brings to the analysis of this material the learning and the methods of a trained psychologist. The book is noteworthy, also, for the tenacity with which it follows the social clew to the origin and development of religion as opposed to all theories that give large

<sup>1</sup> Irving King, *The Development of Religion: A Study in Anthropology and Social Psychology*. New York, The Macmillan Company. 1910. pp. xxiv, 371.

place to emotional and intellectual reactions that are aroused by the phenomena of nature.

The central idea of the work is that religious states of mind arise from antecedent "overt" acts called forth from the psychophysical organism by the conditions of existence, particularly social existence. "The lack of a psychological basis is evident in practically all discussions of religious phenomena. . . . Nearly all are one-sided on account of the failure to take account of the reaction as the fundamental psychic unit." In the words of Goethe, "*Im Anfang war die That.*" Among social activities that are simple and natural responses to specific environmental conditions, certain ones may be called religious practices. They originate from no religious motive, aspiration, or antecedent of any kind, but they awaken a type of consciousness that is religious. What, then, are these spontaneous religious practices? Not those that serve an immediate biological utility, but rather accessory acts or chance accompaniments of utility-acts, sports and festivals expressing emotional overflow, and acts intermediate to relatively remote ends. They all represent values, but the values of more or less reflective appreciation rather than those of immediate pains and pleasures. By association of ideas these activities take on the importance of the primary utility-acts, and by imitation they are repeated and consolidated into a relatively distinct body. Thus the religious reaction is "secondary to a social process of some sort originating in other than a religious need."

If, then, we will retrace the evolution of religion, we must go backward from individual religious consciousness to a strictly social consciousness; from religious consciousness to religious group-practices; and these practices we shall find to be a sort of "aside" that has differentiated itself from the primary adjustment-reactions. Back of all religion, moreover, we reach an undifferentiated social existence that is non-religious.

The earliest development of the religious consciousness proceeds through the apparently universal primitive belief in a "mysterious power" (manitou, wakonda, orenda, mana, etc.) that can bless or injure. This power, King says, is impersonal and quasi-mechanical. If by animism is meant the notion that

things are spirits or the abode of spirits, then animism is not the earliest type of thought. Men must have undergone a considerable mental development before they could form the concept of spirit or person. For the same reason, however, they could not at first form the idea of the impersonal. We may therefore question whether King's repeated declaration that the "mysterious power" is impersonal is not an expression of his own distinction-making mind rather than of the standpoint of the primitive mind. In any case, King maintains, the "power" is not distinctly either religious or magical, but it is capable of playing into the hands of either religion or magic. Religion did not arise through the breakdown of magical control of the "power," for magic and religion coexist, and both use the "power." They shade into each other. Yet they differ in that religion is a more distinctly social development, an affair of the group, while magic is predominantly an individual affair. King makes many acute suggestions as to the probable rise of various magical practices. As in the case of religion, so here, the real explanation is no general principle such as the "sympathetic" view of spatial or causal connections, but rather accessory, or excess, or anticipatory, activities which by association and imitation acquire the importance of the central utility-act.

The appearance of deities is a direct consequence of social organization. The most primitive form of religion is simply the regulative social structure. "Whether there is also present a religious *consciousness* or not, is a matter of indifference." But because religious values are fundamentally social they had to be expressed at least in personal terms. The gods are not nature-powers that have been personified, but symbols of social valuations. Worship, too, is not based upon a mere analogy of social relations; it is itself a portion of the social activity. The ancestor-god simply perpetuates the family relations. Animals and other objects became gods because they seemed to possess the "power," and the favorable or unfavorable use of the "power" could be thought of in no other terms than those of friendliness or unfriendliness, the more so that many of the gods, without doubt, were simply men who had seemed to have an extraordinary portion of the "power."

Any profound change in the social interests of a group, as a transformation of industries, produces a corresponding change in the gods. Then the old gods are likely to grow dim, generalized, the "high gods of low religions"—high, not because of any function they perform, but because of their high abstractedness. Thus the actual social life is the universally controlling factor. Religion has no identity or continuity of its own; higher forms do not evolve out of lower; there is no true natural series in such successions as polytheism, henotheism, monotheism; rather, religion is nothing but the flowing product of social forces that are continuous.

All this applies to ethical monotheism, as to lower forms. The notion that there is one only god is not primarily an intellectual achievement; it arises neither through speculation nor through observation of the uniformities of nature, but by way of an intense and unified social consciousness. If a god, even a tribal god, fills the horizon of his worshippers, he is to them ultimate, supreme, functionally a *monotheos*. Even the Yahweh of the later prophets represents rather psychological than metaphysical monotheism. His high moral character, too, not less than his unity, has its roots in the social life of the people. "Primitive morals and primitive religion are but two sides of the same thing," and the primitive *ethos*, as King is careful to show, contains all the fundamental human virtues. These virtues, all through their development, are reflected into the gods, and the unrealized effort after goodness also reflects itself in the ideal qualities of the divine.

Thus we have in principle a complete natural history of religion. Its factors are simply psycho-physical organisms reacting socially to the conditions of existence. Religion is a product of these factors, and only a product. No special instinct, germ, or other primordial factor is needed. Moreover, this theory makes religion practically a by-product, for it is not directly related to the struggle for existence, or even to any immediate social utility. It is "appreciative" rather than "practical," a luxury rather than a staple food. The gods take no part in our actual adjustments. A deity is nothing but a symbol for values already realized in experience or else looked for in future experience. King is careful to say that he speaks within the limits of psychology

only, leaving out of account the question of the metaphysical existence of a deity. Nevertheless, he explicitly commits himself to a view of reality that makes it merely functional, and therefore brings it wholly within the sphere of functional psychology. "Our concepts are only functionally valid, and do not refer to ontological realities. All our realities are of the functional variety. They are realities because they serve these definite functions, and for no other reason." Possibly the meaning of the first of these apparently contradictory statements is this: "If you hold to a transcendental metaphysics, you can accept this psychological account without necessarily contradicting the notion of a really existing and transcendently efficient deity." But it is clear that King himself writes from the standpoint, not merely of scientific method in general, but also of the philosophy of absolute empiricism. This is not the place to weigh this or any other metaphysics, but it will be appropriate to examine briefly one or two of his broadest generalizations.

The datum out of which religion is to be deduced is psycho-physical organisms reacting overtly and in groups to the conditions of existence, and becoming conscious as a consequence. Obviously the adequacy of this datum for the work that is required of it depends upon how we conceive these "psycho-physical organisms." In the first place, being organisms, they must have structure; being psychical, they must have psychical structure. Granted that there are no innate principles such as Locke combated; granted that there is no religious instinct, just as there is no scientific, artistic, or political instinct; nevertheless, political, artistic, and scientific reactions, when they appear, necessitate the assumption of antecedents different from those that would otherwise be required. We learn what the structure is by what the organism does. In various details King uses this principle, though he ignores its applicability to religion as a whole. "When the worth of an object is established by its relations to a group's practical and social life," he says, "it thereby gains enough internal momentum to go on increasing in relative independence of practical and social interests." Again, in each religious rite there are both "form" and "content," the former being determined by the structure of the worshipping body. Especially in the

higher religions we find a certain individuality, a predetermined direction of variations. Further, a god never reflects merely the actual character of his devotees, but also a certain outreaching or projection beyond actual achievements. Finally, variation, however obscure its ground, does always have a specific ground for the particular form that it takes. In view of all these detailed recognitions of the principle, how is it that no specific ground for religion is attributed to the "psycho-physical organism"? The part played by this important factor is, in fact, obscure. What is described as a psycho-physical organism seems to acquire psychical qualities first through its own "overt" activities. Again, consciousness is represented as first of all purely individual. "It is not . . . a part of a larger life, either social or divine." Nevertheless sociality is *assumed* as a precondition of religion.

This indefiniteness in the antecedents accounts in part for a certain shadowiness with respect to the dynamic relations of religion. The wide-spread and persistent activities of religion can hardly be a mere "aside." They can hardly be mere "products" of social forces. If the practically universal religious activity could be shown to have no effect upon mere biological survival, it would of itself demonstrate how far a merely biological conception of the psycho-physical organism comes from explaining religion. That religion is only a product of society and not a producer thereof; that it is only a reflective valuation of life, and not life itself, not adjustment to actual conditions that come to light even in the religious reaction itself; how could one possibly hold to all this except through some over-fondness for data and presuppositions that are inadequately conceived? At several points principles assumed in the work itself seem to require, or at least favor, a more dynamic view of religion. Thus, if we start with overt action as the primal datum of the development, why should not the development itself consist in the gradual attainment of fully controlled, rational, efficient action? And in fact, has religion really gone off on a side-track of uncreative appreciation? In its highest forms is it not, rather, an assertion of a purpose adequate to all the conditions of life, and is not its call precisely to the hardest kind of action? Again, if religion has its source in social action, we should expect it to have some

function in promoting social development. In the case of ancestor-worship such a function is perfectly distinct; and again in the religion of Israel and its continuation in Christianity we have a further development of just such social forces. Here the divinity, like the ancestor-god, appears as a member of a social circle and essential to its completeness. Indeed, a fully socialized religion can no more merely "use" its gods than a fully socialized child can merely use its parents.

It is, therefore, only a partially socialized religion in which the divinity is nothing but a symbol for values experienced, or to be experienced, by the worshipper. Every item of evidence, moreover, that deities are nothing but such symbols can be paralleled by evidence that my fellow-men are likewise simply symbols for my values. In short, it is no mere natural history that we are dealing with here, but a metaphysical or epistemological view which governs the whole argument. "A scientific statement has no meaning," asserts the author, "except within a closed system of definite relations." It would be interesting to know where such a system can be found in any observational science. Professor King applies an altogether too severe standard to his own work. The book is replete with important facts and convincing details of interpretation, but it presents no "closed system."